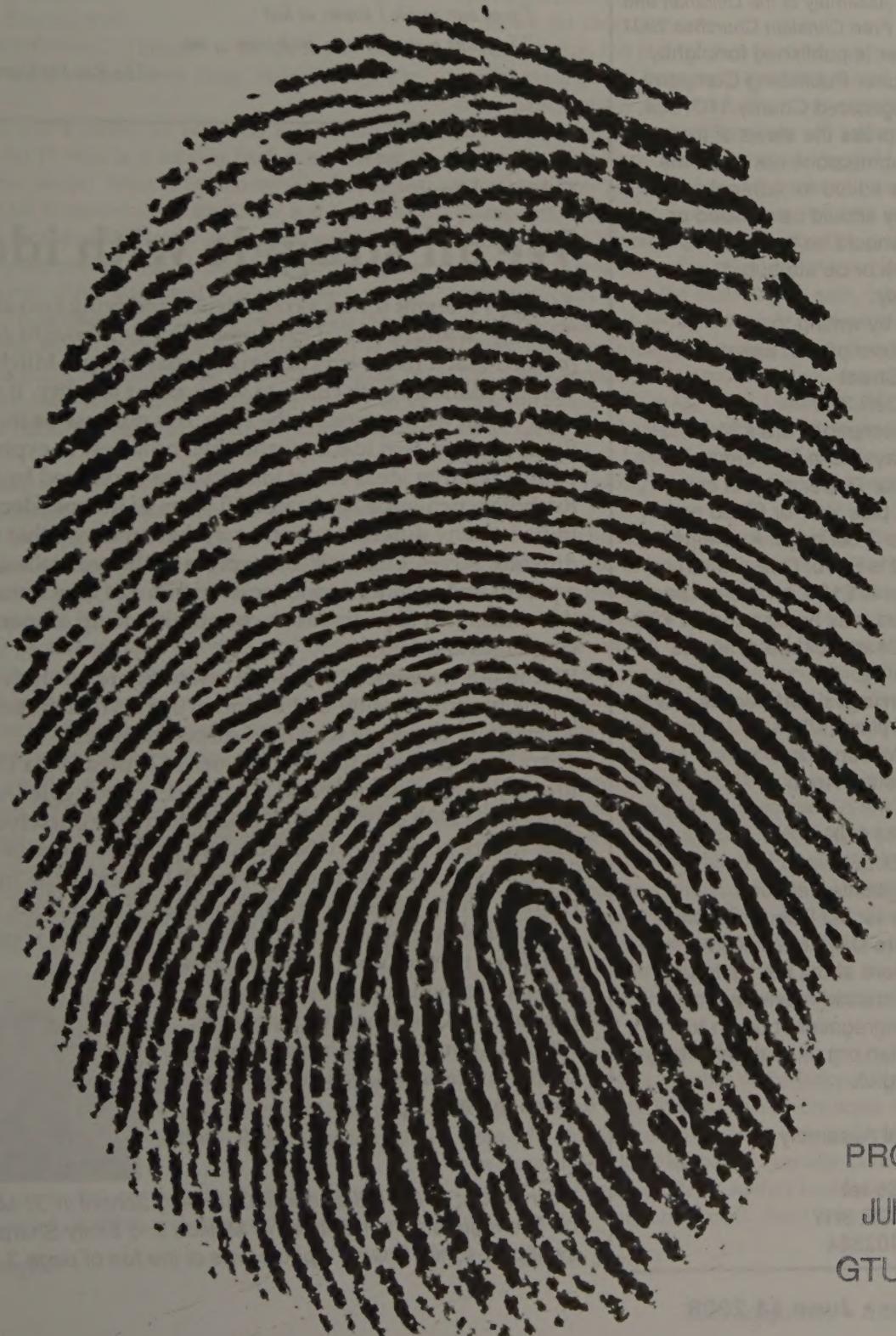


The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7700 June 14 2008

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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest
Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

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Editor M Colleen Burns

46A Newmarket Road

Cringleford

Norwich NR4 6UF

ph: 01603 505281

e: inquirer@btinternet.com

Copyeditor Isobel Rainey de Diaz

Cover Photo Davide Guglielmo

Find out more about the Unitarian and Free Christian movement or locate a congregation. Log on to www.unitarian.org.uk or email info@unitarian.org.uk

Write to

The General Assembly

Essex Hall

1-6 Essex Street

London WC2R 3HY

ph: 0207 2402384

Inquiring Words

*Amidst the trees I found a boy
A little lost and much confused
Who found it hard to find the joy
In things his fellow lads had used.*

*In yonder wood I found a man
Wrinkled, frail, his old frame bent
He calmed the boy as no one can
With tales of how his own life went.*

*The boy's life was the old man's past
Twas with mine, the story of all three
From deep inside I knew, at last
The young man, old man, both were ... me.*

— The Rev Dr Vernon Marshall

Editor's View

We all struggle with identity

At first, I thought it was a coincidence, receiving two articles on 'Identity' within a day of each other. But as I thought about it, I realised that it really isn't surprising that Lianne Mitchell and Vernon Marshall both chose to write about identity. It is something with which we struggle all the time. It is our task as individuals to figure out our own identity, and then how best to express it. One of my favourite ideas about identity was expressed by Salman Rushdie when India celebrated 50 years of independence. He said India is many different countries in the same way that we all have different selves. One 'self' we express in the workplace, another as a parent and another as a lover or friend. Yet they remain parts of the whole. Just as India is one country made up of many cultures, languages and faiths.

Within our movement, too, we work to figure out how to hold on to our individuality and maintain our own identities within a community of people who hold disparate beliefs.

Then, there is the all-important work of expressing a Unitarian identity to the outside world. That, too, is a struggle. As a movement with no parallel, we have to define ourselves in order that we are not simply labelled – and perhaps dismissed – by our critics. It is a task made that much harder by the freedom we cherish. There was some recent progress on that front, as some video clips by the Rev David Usher (photo below) were recently uploaded to YouTube. He does a good job of defining Unitarians, but not limiting us. Check out the videos at: http://uk.youtube.com/results?search_query=unitarian+david+usher+ldpa&search_type=&aq=f

— MC Burns



Correction: In the article about Channing School in 31 May issue of 'The Inquirer', the identities of Matilda and Emily Sharpe were swapped. Emily Sharpe's photo was at the top of page 3.

Two views of developing identity

By Lyanne Mitchell

It is hard to know who we really are, with all the conditioning that happens in life. When we are young, we either accept our family's version of our identity, or rebel against it. As we grow and mature, we pass through many stages – perhaps trying on a variety of identities until we find the one that fits. But what actually constitutes one's *identity*? Starting with the dictionary's definition.... 'Identity is the quality or condition of being a specified person or thing. Individuality. Personality.'

When we look into a mirror, we are faced with the ultimate question. Who am I? Who is it looking back at me? What is behind the mirror image? What is behind my eyes? Is it just flesh and bone? Or is there more to me? How is it I can even ask such questions and reflect on my own reflection? We live in a time much preoccupied, even obsessed, by identity. Identity theft is a crime of our times and is growing fast; we are listed on endless data bases – there is nowhere to hide (So the TV licence people tell us and the car-tax peoples tell us and the tax man tells us). Then there is the controversial issue of ID cards for everyone – and even the suggestion that all of us should have our DNA on a national register for crime and terror prevention.

All-encompassing corporate identity

As a graphic designer, corporate identity was an important part of my job – creating images or logos by which companies can be instantly recognised. Later, as a tutor, I used to tell my students that the company logo on the stationery was only one facet of the company's ID. Their image was carried on everything from their packaging, their premises, and their signage – right down to the person who answers their phones. Corporate Identity is a complex matter, involving a large variety of factors. The same can be said of personal identity.

Even the Unitarian movement has got in on the act – creating a corporate 'smile' on the chalice i.e. a curved edge, as its new improved logo. I must confess it makes me smile to think that a group which so prides itself on individuality and freedom from conformity should strive to develop a corporate identity when our ethos is so linked with nonconformity. It could be said that our identity is diversity! If you log on to the Unitarian Societies website, you can see a variety of chalices, each expressing a different facet of the Unitarian movement. The music society has a musical note for a flame. The Peace Fellowship has open hands supporting the flame. Hucklow Summer School has a sunburst. And the earth Spirit Network has a tree chalice supporting a leaf as a flame. Perhaps this variety of logos is the best corporate identity for our movement. It allows us to express our individual facets and interests within the larger body.

We would all agree that our identity goes far deeper and wider than our name, address and bank details. Surely our

When we look into a mirror, we are faced with the ultimate question. Who am I? Who is it looking back at me?

By the Rev Dr Vernon Marshall

It is so very painful to witness a beloved elder member of your family becoming mentally infirm. Forgetting to take medication, eating only sometimes, and being unsure which member of the family is in the same room. Witnessing all that is to witness someone becoming someone else, a different person.

As we get older, we constantly change, but just refining what we are is different. We are the same person but simply becoming wiser, we hope, and more philosophical as we reflect on our experiences. Sometimes, however, we leave behind our old self and change remarkably. Sometimes children who are 'ugly ducklings' blossom into beautiful adults. Just as they were hesitant and shy as youngsters, they have now become confident and bold. This may be due to life situations, or to intention and personal effort, or to careful nurturing by others. As a child, I was very sheepish. I was never the leader of the pack, but a follower. I was physically frail, brought down by constant attacks of tonsillitis until I had a tonsillectomy at age 11. Speaking in public was agony, worsened by a speech defect, something of which I am still aware. At the age of 18 I joined a political party but never spoke at meetings. That was until I decided to change. It was torture but I forced myself into situations that gave me confidence. Looking back, I feel that I am not the person I once was.

Throughout history changes in individuals were so far-reaching that there was little connection with who they were before. Gautama, the Buddha, began life as a pampered son of a king. Protected from the pain of normal life, he was selfish and insular. Then he roamed the streets and began to empathise with ordinary people. His spiritual journey changed him. He became a man whose words flowed from his mouth like honey. He was not the same person. Graham Taylor was an arrogant teenager whom I knew in Scarborough. A political right-wing extremist, he was unbearable. Then he went to live in London and witnessed poverty and street violence. A few years later he returned to Scarborough a gentle, soft and warm-hearted man. He eventually became a Church of England priest but gave it up when he became a writer, making his fortune with *Shadowmancer*, a book similar to *The Lord of the Rings*.

We grow and develop as individuals. That is enough for most of us, remaining the same but more evolved than we were young. For some of us, however, it is essential to become someone else.

The need to become someone else

For a while I was a member of the Independent Monitoring Board at Forest Bank Prison. There were many old lags there, those who thought of prison as an occupational hazard. Just like Norman Stanley Fletcher of *Porridge* fame, they did not change. They awaited release so they could commit their next crime, but this time undetected. But I have met people who

We are the same person but simply becoming wiser, we hope, and more philosophical as we reflect on our experiences.

(Continued on page 5)

Identity: A process of becoming ‘real’

(Continued from previous page)

identity is closely tied to the various roles we play in life and to our personal relationships. Someone once wrote ‘Committing yourself is a way of finding out who you are. We find our identity by identifying’. We can turn other nouns into verbs – to find friendship by befriending, to find love, by loving. A number of years ago, I joined a group at the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre Hucklow, led by David Monk, which set out to explore many forms of meditation. Each day we studied and experienced a different form. We chanted. We focused on candle flames. We meditated in silence – with eyes closed, with eyes open. We engaged on various visualisations. And, toward the end of the week we did a Zen meditation called, ‘Who am I?’ This is a challenging exercise and we were warned not to embark on it lightly. In hindsight, I feel it should have come with an even stronger ‘health warning’.

Meditating on roles and relationships

David asked us to call up all the roles and relationships within our lives, one by one – beginning with the ‘lightest’, least personal ones, e.g. I am a member of a club or a choir. I am a member of a professional body. My role at work. Membership of a church etc, etc. It was a long meditation. We were given time to focus on each role. Then we were told to negate it, wipe it out, discard it completely and immediately ask ourselves, ‘Now, who am I?’

Gradually, the roles and relationships became more personal and more meaningful. If I am no longer a friend, now who am I? I am no longer a mother or father; now who am I? I am no longer a daughter or a son; now, who am I? I am no longer a sister or brother; now who am I? I am no longer a wife or a husband; now who am I?

We asked ourselves deeper and deeper questions, stripping away roles. Suddenly, one of our group bolted for the door. This person was an experienced meditator and she had gone in very deep. We discovered later that she had gone so deep, and felt so stripped of her identity that she found herself in a ‘dark place that was truly frightening’. She was in a very real panic – frightened out of her wits! The ultimate aim of this Zen exercise is precisely that – to ‘lose oneself’ (and I assume, one’s ego) and become a part of the great ‘All’ or the Universe.

Most of us mere mortals are just not ready to lose who we are – the roles and relationships which define and identify us and help us to know who we are. Returning to the idea of the mirror – our relationships reflect back to us who we are. It has been said that when we take an instant dislike to someone, it is because they reflect back some aspect of ourselves that we dislike. And, of course, people we love reflect back the loving part of ourselves. Most good therapists help their patients not by imposing their ideas upon them but by asking a series of questions which help the person to find their own answers ... a kind of reflecting process toward self knowledge.

Actions change, identity remains the same

When I was younger, I used to worry about how I seemed to change personality when I was with different groups of friends. I was the ‘joker/clown’ with my art school pals, but then I was the serious one with church friends and I was often the flippant one within my family. I used to worry that I was a bit of a chameleon – changing my colours depending on my environment. But then I realised, they were all facets of me, and all sincere in their own way.

Nature acts like a mirror for me. I see the beauty of nature as a mirror for the Creator or God. Nature itself is not God. It reveals and reflects the wonder, complexity, power and mystery of the creative Spirit. But I do not equate it with Spirit itself. Meister Eckhart was attempting to explain this process – i.e. looking deep into ourselves as into a mirror to try to understand the soul or God within. He condemned himself by his own words when he came before the Inquisition and said: ‘I am God looking out through my own eyes’. When Jesus was asked if he thought he was the ‘son of God’, he answered that he was the ‘son of man’ - but it was perceived as the same, ultimate heresy.

Forgotten identities

How many important facets of our human identity have we forgotten within our society? Have we forgotten our crucial role as positive role-models and teachers to the young? Have we forgotten the part of ourselves that honours and respects strangers in our midst? Have we forgotten how to be kind? How to be gentle?

Over the last year, I have undergone a change of identity in my working life. I have taken early retirement to become a children’s author and illustrator. I have written four children’s books – as yet unpublished while I search for an agent. I do a lot of research for my books. The ladies at my local library must think I have a tribe of grandchildren, because I take out armfuls of children’s books – to study in terms of style and content. Recently, I re-acquainted myself with the children’s classic story - ‘The Velveteen Rabbit’. I was stunned by it all over again – and I realised that all subsequent stories about beloved toys, including Pinocchio and Disney’s ‘Toy Story’ and my own story – ‘Sad Lion’ are all pale shadows of this wonderful book.

Our task is to become ‘real’

The Skin Horse attempts to explain ‘being real’ to the velveteen rabbit when he arrives in the nursery as a new toy. The story goes on, as you probably know, to relate how the velveteen rabbit becomes the Boy’s most beloved toy – going everywhere with him. One day, he meets the live rabbits in the field near the house, and wonders why he cannot move and run like them, realising he is severely limited by being stitched. When the Boy becomes very ill with scarlet fever, velveteen rabbit stays close beside him in his bed. But when he recovers, the doctor insists that the velveteen rabbit must be burned because the toy is full of disease and germs. This is the transformation (And I suppose we can interpret it as a form of resurrection). The velveteen rabbit becomes a real rabbit and finds himself living in the field with the others. One day, the Boy spots him and his distinctive markings and says ‘That rabbit looks just like my old velveteen rabbit!’ Little does he know that it is in fact his old toy – which has now become *real*. This was Margery Williams’ first book and best-known out of 30 children’s books. It was first published in 1922 and has become a classic. The velveteen rabbit (and the reader) learns that it can be painful to be real – it can hurt – and it happens slowly over time, when we are truly loved. Then, even though we become shabby, and all our hair is loved off, we can never be un-real again.

Lianne Mitchell is a member of the Glasgow congregation.

New identities changed history

(Continued from page 3)

have become someone else. They did not like what they were, who they were. They were uneasy with the kind of person they had become. With a real sense of mission and a belief in the ability to change completely, they turned their lives around. They modelled for themselves a new persona. I do not mean they changed into artificial characters, like the Hyacinth Bucketts of this world who are just the same underneath – but they became people who developed different sentiments, a different awareness, a different character.

The value of becoming someone else

Sometimes a person may need a fundamental change. It can only happen if there is a will to change, if there is an effort to change, and if there is a need to change. Not everybody needs to change so fundamentally. Traditional Christianity talks of repentance. It says that we need to be sorry for our actions in a deeply meaningful way, and then we become someone new by being reborn. Unitarianism scorns the idea of a second birth. But we may still need an overhaul of our character and personhood. Unlike traditional Christianity, Unitarianism is not dependent on faith in a third person. It is still dependent on faith, however. It is dependent upon faith in oneself – in one's own ability to live a gentler, more loving life.

A recent television play focused on a young man released from prison after a number of years. He had killed a child when he was only a child himself. Everybody liked this kind, thoughtful person until the truth got out about his past. "But I am not the same person", he insisted. Everybody's previous experience of him was forgotten. The young man eventually

killed himself. Geeta Sereny wrote a book about the child-killer Mary Bell, who killed two young children when she was only eleven. She has grown up into a different person, a regretful person, but a gentle and caring mother of a grown-up daughter. Ebenezer Scrooge completely changed. The name "Scrooge" conjures up images of meanness and selfishness. It shouldn't though, as the man became kind and thoughtful of others. *A Christmas Carol* is the best story I have read of the human character's strength to change into something more spiritual and loving.

Many faiths offer stories of change

The Bible has stories of people who changed, who became someone else. Paul, the fierce persecutor, became the biggest supporter of Jesus. In Indian history, the Emperor Asoka was a violent ruler whose empire was built on the blood of his enemies. He then became inspired by Buddhism and gave up fighting. He built hospitals and animal sanctuaries and monuments bearing the Buddha's sayings. He established institutions run by consent. His empire lasted a very long time and goes down in history as an example of how a nation should function.

There is a belief in transpersonal psychology that we have different sub-personalities within us and that different ones take over at different times and in different circumstances. To take control of our lives, we need to connect to the Higher Self, and allow the better parts to become dominant. In other words, we can become someone else, but for the best of all possible reasons.

The Rev Dr Vernon Marshall is minister at Dukinfield and Denton.

15 new facilitators join CAP programme

By David Arthur

Joyce Ashworth is a busy lady! As well as being this year's GA President, she is also the co-ordinator of the Congregational Assessment Process (CAP), which helps congregations build toward a more successful future. The process involves visits from a pair of facilitators, and these facilitators need to be trained.

So Joyce recently organised a training course for existing and new facilitators; this took place over the Bank Holiday weekend in the idyllic surroundings of Hothorpe Hall, a Christian-oriented conference and retreat centre in rural Leicestershire. We arrived through a field of sheep, and my bedroom window overlooked a woodpigeon's nest with the female assiduously incubating an egg; coupled with comfortable rooms, excellent food and comprehensive facilities, who could ask for anything more?

Spread over two days, the training course was run by the Revs Donald and Linda Phillips, who (before they entered the ministry) were the professional consultants when the scheme was first trialled as the Congregational Consultancy Project, and had trained the first set of facilitators. The course included both theoretical and practical sessions; some of the role play exercises, while making very serious points, allowed – or even compelled – participants to adopt a very different persona from their own, often with hilarious results! We managed to

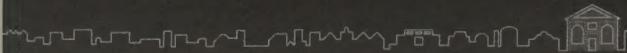


Dawn Buckle (standing) leads a discussion at the training session for CAP facilitators. Photo by John Hewerdine

keep straight faces in true professional style, of course!

Following this most successful course, we now have a cadre of up to 15 facilitators who can be called upon to help congregations who ask for help and advice. Administered through the Denominational Support Commission, the Process is open to any congregation; it can be very well worth it.

David Arthur is a member at Wakefield.



300 YEARS OF DISSENT

The congregation of Newington Green Unitarian Church is celebrating the church building's 300th anniversary. Events will take place throughout the year, including a commemorative service on Saturday 21 June, concerts and talks. All are welcome to attend. For details visit www.new-unity.org, or contact Andy Pakula, on 07809 144 879 or by email at apakula@gmail.com.

15th June: 7.00 pm, Nihavend. Classical Ottoman music concert. £7/£5 Purchase tickets online, (www.new-unity.org/) at the door, or by phone 08700 600 100.

18th June: 7.30 pm, Newington Green Action Group launches 'History of Newington Green' by Alex Allardyce. Mildmay Club:

21st June: 2.30 pm, 300th Anniversary of Newington Green Unitarian Church Official Commemorative Service, followed by a celebration tea at the Mildmay Club. All are welcome.

13 July: 12.30-15.30 on Newington Green: Newington Green Action Group's 'Jazz on the Green' and Newington Green Unitarians Picnic on the Green with 300th Birthday Cake

13th September: Newington Green Sings the Blues.

Performance by Marcia Willis and friends. £7/£5. Purchase tickets online, at the door, or by phone 08700 600 100.

20th and 21st September: Open House London 2008 – Guided tours of Newington Green Unitarian Church by members of the congregation

20th September: 6.00 pm. A choral performance by The London Gallery Quire singing church music of the 17th and 18th centuries in the style of the period. £7/£5 Purchase Tickets Online, on the door, or ring 08700600100

20th September: 8.00 pm. 300 Years of Dissent by Alan Ruston – Stories from 300 Years of Newington Green Unitarian Church, performed by members of the congregation

4th October: Psallite: Stoke Newington Women's Choir, directed by Nancy Hadden. 8.00 pm. Purchase tickets online, at the door, or by phone 08700 600 100.

13th November: 7.30 pm, Richard Price Memorial Lecture 2008 – given by Evan Davis, Presenter on BBC Radio 4 Today Programme. £15/£10. Purchase tickets online, at the door, or by phone 08700 600 100.

22nd November: Congregational evening of performance. £7/£5 on the door

17th December: (date to be confirmed) on Newington Green Carols on the Green, with Newington Green Action Group.

GA Election to the Executive Committee

The following is the timetable that is expected to be followed. Further details will follow later.

Nominations open	22 September 2008
Nominations close	20 October 2008
Ballot papers sent out	3 November 2008
Election starts	8 November 2008
Election closes	13 December 2008
Results	17 December 2008
April 2009	New EC meets at GA Meetings
Electoral Panel –	Alan Ruston, Peter Hewis, Andrew Hill

Enjoying friend



Celia Midgley with Rev. Arpad Szabo at Unitarian Headquarters in Transylvania. (photo right) Celia and Bishop Szabo in the Unitarian Church, in Torocko. (below) A newly build church in Segesvár. Photos by John Midgley.

By John Midgley

'Go to Transylvania in the spring!' was the advice. The Rev Celia Midgley was warned against a winter visit, when temperatures can be bitter and travelling difficult. So despite its being just after the conclusion of her year as General Assembly president year, in May she accepted an invitation from the Rev Árpád Szabó, Bishop of the Unitarian Church of Transylvania, to re-affirm long-standing relationships between our two denominations, and to re-connect with old friends and learning more about our shared heritage.

The journey included a brief stop-over in Budapest, Hungary, to meet long-standing friend the Rev József Kászoni, minister of First Church. His handsome and busy place of worship stands in the government office district of this beautiful capital. It was good to see Hungarian translations of articles and pictures from *The Inquirer* up on their notice board, and to learn of the complex negotiations to regain ownership of their large suite of office premises. These had been confiscated by the government during the communist era. The Unitarians are pleased to have recently reclaimed 51% ownership.

On then to Transylvania, a region of Romania which is largely Hungarian speaking. The Rev Dávid Gyero, administrative councillor to the Bishop, gave Celia and John a warm welcome at Cluj airport and was extremely helpful in guiding their five-day stay in Kolozsvár (to give this busy university city its Hungarian name).

First, to Unitarian Headquarters, an impressive building on the main street. There, in his large office, Celia conveyed the greetings of the General Assembly to Bishop Árpád. Over coffee and pastries, they talked of the difficulties of the past and of future hopes, which are steadily being transformed into reality. The headquarters building also houses a high school and the story was told of how, in 1989, all this had been reclaimed after government confiscation. 'We re-entered the main hall which in the past had been our Chapel, took down communist propaganda pictures to uncover portraits of our former bishops. We re-entered our pulpit, where we proclaimed, 'Egy Az Isten! - God is One!'

Upstairs then, for a word with the teaching staff of the

and lilac time in Transylvania

residential high school, undergoing extensive modernisation with funding help from friends at home and abroad. In the past, the building also housed the college where ministers are trained, but in the communist era the four main denominations had been forced to 'go ecumenical', in the nearby Theological Institute. Obligatory co-operation was patiently accepted and still operates. Lunchtime conversation with the professors, including some who have visited Britain, described how the Institute's Presidency rotates and is currently held by the Rev Elek Rezi, Unitarian professor of systematic theology.

An early start the next morning for an all-day excursion to Segesvár, for a tears-of-joy re-union with the Rev Feri Nagy, now a vigorous 92 years old. Feri has long-standing connections with the UK and in the early 90s preached at Celia's church in Urmston. Over glasses of plum brandy, gifts and memories were shared with his devoted family, followed by a visit to a newly built church alongside a memorial park named after the much-loved poet Petőfi. We then went to another Unitarian high school in process of restoration, after its return (in very poor condition) from government confiscation. Then a few more miles, to see another beautiful newly built church, erected for Unitarians who had migrated from the villages.

Next day, a second excursion took in Torda, where the famous Edict was proclaimed by the martyr Francis David in the reign of Unitarian king John Sigismund. A pause, too, at a memorial to a young Unitarian minister who, in 2006, suffered a fatal heart attack after a bitter political battle to regain their church school. Across the Golden River, a brief stop at the beautiful Torda Gorge with its lovely wild flowers and birdsong, then on to Torockó, 'the village where the sun rises twice each day'. The Unitarian church dominates and a delightful folk museum stands near a well, where animals drink and villagers do their laundry. Prince Charles had visited a few days before. He has an interest in the area. Does he know that Transylvania once



had a Unitarian monarch?

Next, over bumpy potholes, past wandering cattle, horse-drawn carts and lonely workers out in the fields, with only rarely a tractor to be seen, to a village church on which the word Unitarian appeared first in history, in 1613. Next stop, another beautiful village church, twice in its history burned down and rebuilt. On the journey went, with only brief pauses to admire lovely landscapes and delight in the countless lilac blooms of every shade.

Sunday morning brought Pentecost worship. Celia processed along Francis David Street with the Bishop and the church's minister, the Rev Ferenc Bálint, plus two other ministers, into First Church, Kolozsvár, prominent on the main street. After preaching to a congregation of slightly less than 300, she assisted in serving communion. A moving moment came when she sipped wine from the very chalice used by Francis David in the 16th century. Meanwhile, John Midgley preached in Second Church, a smaller congregation out in the suburbs and also assisted in serving communion.

Sunday lunch was with the two Kolozsvár ministers and their families gave a chance to swap stories and experiences and look to the future. Bishop Szabó retires at the end of this year and the process is in hand to elect his successor. He has much to be proud of, having led the denomination through 12 transforming years. A well-known figure on the international scene, he values the contacts that the International Association for Religious Freedom and the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists bring. He has concerns about how to preserve the village congregations, as so many young people are migrating to the cities and even abroad. However, our Unitarian cousins there continue to recruit able and impressive young ministers and are adapting to a new, freer world. The process of regaining their properties and of re-establishing their schools makes their life as Unitarians busy and challenging.

On Pentecost Sunday, Celia and John learned that the Hungarian word for 'spirit', the Holy Spirit that encourages, renews and overcomes language barriers, sounds just like our word 'lilac'. Both flowers and spirits were blooming on this rewarding and stimulating visit to delightful Transylvania.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.



Reasons to be cheerful 2008

By Cliff Reed

One of the hallmarks of Unitarian belief a century ago was widespread optimism about the future of humanity. One of James Freeman Clarke's 'Five Points of Unitarian Belief' (1886), displayed in many if not most Unitarian churches at the time, proclaims, 'The progress of man onward and upward for ever'. But it wasn't just Clarke. Other Unitarian documents of the late 19th and early 20th centuries reflect the same sentiment. The Fifty Affirmations of the Free Religious Association (1867), drafted by Francis Ellingwood Abbot, include the following at numbers 36 and 37: 'The great faith or moving power of Free Religion is faith in man as a progressive being. The great ideal end of Free Religion is the perfection or complete development of man...' The Western Unitarian Conference's 'Things Commonly Believed Among Us' (1894), drafted by William Channing Gannett, includes the statement, 'We believe in the growing nobility of Man'. In 1901, James Drummond wrote: '...we perceive that a Divine Word has been present through all the world's groaning and travailing, slowly evolving the highest human attributes, drawing men on, through all their devious wanderings, through all their lapses and failures, still ever on towards the consummate perfection of their nature'. In the same year, Otto Pfleiderer, the German liberal theologian, put it more concisely: God 'stands entirely on the side of modern Evolutionism and Optimism'.

These sentiments were echoed in popular Unitarian hymns that saw the dawning of the Kingdom of God in terms of human progress rather than apocalyptic divine intervention. 'How shall come Thy kingdom holy, in which all the earth is blest...' asks a hymn by Minot Judson Savage, and then answers: 'Not with dash or sudden sally, swooping down with rushing wing; but as, creeping up a valley, come the grasses in the spring...Each bright thought and true endeavour hastens on the blessed day.' Another great favourite with Unitarians was this, by John Addington Symonds: 'These things shall be! A loftier race than e'er the world has known shall rise, with flame

of freedom in their souls and light of knowledge in their eyes.' If we sing those hymns at all today, it is with an almost desperate yearning rather than with confidence that the Kingdom is almost here!

In 1912, the Titanic (a ship with considerable Unitarian connections!) hit an iceberg and sank. It was a telling symbol of what was soon to happen to the misplaced optimism, not only of our Unitarian forbears, but of western civilization more generally. By the time we had got through two World Wars, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima, there wasn't much sign of that 'loftier race'! Ideas of 'progress' and of human perfectibility had been shattered by these manifestations of human depravity. The future of the human enterprise had to be faced without the naive confidence of our predecessors. And as we look at a world still scarred by war and human wickedness, its future threatened by environmental catastrophe and over-population, it is easy to despair.

But just as our forbears made the mistake of thinking that progress was inevitable, that the dawn of the Kingdom of God on earth was just around the corner, with their optimism divinely guaranteed, might not we make a mistake in going to the other extreme? They failed to see the disaster, the iceberg that was even then looming up through the fog. Might not we, in our pessimism, fail to see – and to grasp – the opportunities that, even now, are presenting themselves? The thirst for peace and justice, the growing awareness of the crises we face in our stewardship of the planet, the consciousness that we are truly one humanity sharing one world – all these suggest that the human race is not yet lost, that the Spirit still speaks to us and within us. But neither is the human race yet won. There are no copper-bottomed guarantees. Our prayer must be for wisdom and courage, for a growing sense of global solidarity based on realism rather than on vapid idealism. We are all in this together, regardless of nation or creed - and realising that might be our best hope. Only time will tell.

The Rev Cliff Reed is minister at Ipswich.

Trust needs help to restore the Gaskell House

By Janet Allen

Please help save the Gaskell House in Manchester – where *Cranford* was written. The beautiful Gaskell House, 84 Plymouth Grove, Manchester, is listed grade II* (among the top 7% of buildings in Britain) was built about 1838. As visitors will see, it still has many of its original features, including plasterwork, doors, shutters, etc. But it has been neglected by its previous owners and is in such poor condition that it is on the English Heritage Buildings at Risk Register. It needs very careful and complete restoration, from the roof right down to the drains.

Elizabeth Stevenson was born in London on 29 September 1810, the daughter of a Unitarian minister. After her mother's early death, she was raised by an aunt who lived in Knutsford. In 1832, she married William Gaskell, also a Unitarian minister, and they settled in Manchester. Motherhood and the obligations of a minister's wife kept her busy. However, the death of her only son inspired her to write her first novel, *Mary Barton*, published anonymously in 1848.

It was an immediate success, winning the praise of Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle. Dickens invited her to contribute to his magazine, *Household Words*, where her next major work, *Cranford*, appeared in 1853. *North and South* was published the following year.

Gaskell's work brought her many friends, including the novelist Charlotte Brontë. When Charlotte died in 1855, her father, Patrick Brontë, asked Gaskell to write her biography. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) was written with admiration and covered a huge quantity of firsthand material.

Gaskell died on 12 November 1865, leaving her longest work, *Wives and Daughters* incomplete. The Gaskell family moved to 84 (then 42) Plymouth Grove in 1850. The Gaskell House is one very few surviving homes of 19th century women novelists.

Many leading 19th-century literary figures, such as Dickens and Bronte, came there. This makes the building of national and international importance.

(Continued on next page)

FOY Society looks at penal alternatives

By Jeff Teagle

The FOY Conference 2008, held at the Nightingale Centre at Great Hucklow over a May Bank Holiday weekend, was both absorbing and meaningful for its 35 attendees. Study leaders Richard and Helen Merritt organised a well-balanced programme that enabled the participants to view our nation's punishment system from several viewpoints, including direct contact with people who had experienced the penal system at first hand, – on both sides of the fence.

Tony Cann, of the Penal Affairs Panel, led the first session to identify the issues. Using his presentational technology to good effect, he sought a series of responses through electronic voting to questions of facts about the current punishment system and its effectiveness, or lack thereof. We learnt about the high correlation between alcoholism and drug taking and the prison population; the availability of drugs in prisons; the preponderance of young males serving custodial sentences; the effects of the growth of custodial sentences; the high rates of re-offending, the handicaps facing the prisoners' education programmes; and the attitudes of ourselves and the wider public towards convicted people.

Next, we drove down to Burton Upon Trent to visit the Burton Addiction Treatment Centre. Here, we witnessed the reality of rehabilitation, seeing the facilities, hearing about its treatment methods and meeting both staff and clients. The Treatment Centre operates an 18-week total-abstinence course for clients who have already undertaken a detoxification process. Most convincing was the personal account of staff member Rob, who described his personal journey from violence, heavy drinking and drug abuse, through the prison system, re-offending and finally, when, as he described it, having hit rock-bottom, being motivated to take the rehabilitation course.

Emily Hewerdine, in professional life a counselling, assessment, referral advice and throughcare (CARAT) worker within a Young Offender Institution, led us through an imaginative, but factually based, card game. This illustrated the hurdles and hoops that a young offender needs to progress to prepare for release. The low achievement rate experienced by FOY participants was matched by the realities of the real-life situation.

Guest lecturer, Anton Shelupanov, of the Young Founda-



Tony Cann addresses members of the Foy Society on the penal system. Photo by John Hewerdine

tion delivered an illustrated lecture entitled "Changing public attitudes to offending". Although the tabloid press indulges in knee-jerk reactions toward enlightened prison regimes, Anton was able to demonstrate instances of good publicity, which had attracted favourable coverage.

Richard Merritt took us through the Home Office's offender management strategies and their impressive flow charts. He then analysed the many barriers that cause the strategies to fail so often. Significantly, each prison is managed differently and attitudes vary in consequence.

Emma Bartlett of the Ruskin Foundation described a project at Her Majesty's Prison Haverigg, where inmates were financed to produce a newspaper, *The Seagull*, for distribution inside and outside of the prison. A professional journalist had also advised and the finished product was of a high standard and had been well received in the locality.

The FOY Conference ended with a review of the proceedings and an evaluation of what FOY members could do in the future. The positive outcomes included decisions to have an on-going relationship with the Penal Affairs Panel and to use our influence to give publicity to the efforts to make rehabilitation work more effectively.

Jeff Teagle is a member of the Godalming congregation.

Gaskell wrote 'Cranford' at Plymouth Grove

(Continued from previous page)

The Gaskell family stayed until 1913. In 2004 the Manchester Historic Buildings Trust acquired the house. The Trust is a registered Charity No 1080606, Company Number 3578992.

The ground floor will be recreated as it was in the Gaskells' time, and opened to the public. The basement will be available for groups and meetings. Upstairs there will be offices, and the coach house will accommodate a caretaker and two flats. The house, once restored, should be self-sufficient.

The Trust needs as many people as possible to support our campaign. The Trust would be happy to answer any queries. Write to Janet Allan, Chairman, Manchester Historic Buildings Trust, c/o 10 Dale Road, New Mills, High Peak, SK22 4NW 01663 744233 E-mail:

janet@janetbook.fsnet.co.uk



The house at Plymouth Grove needs to be restored.

Response: Vote complaint is urban myth

By Alex Bradley

In the midst of our workaday concerns, it is too easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. Then something happens to draw our attention to the wider concerns which motivate us. At its last meeting, the Ministerial Fellowship committee discussed the letter of V.C. Mason (*Inquirer*, 3 May). The Committee could not give an opinion on behalf of the Fellowship but gave me their blessing to write to *The Inquirer* as a committee member, in a personal capacity. The views expressed in this article are therefore mine, although others may share them.

The first point is the canard that 'Ministers now have two votes' as a result of recent affiliation of the Ministerial Fellowship to the General Assembly. This is an urban myth. The facts are these: Like all affiliated Societies, the Fellowship will have one vote at General Assembly Meetings. The person casting that vote on behalf of the Fellowship will not be eligible to vote again. If a representative of an affiliated body votes, she or he would not vote in any other capacity.

Mr Mason has done us all a great service in raising this issue, whatever our opinions may be. He raises the question of authority. "By whose authority do you do these things?" is the famous question put to Jesus in the New Testament. We need to ask ourselves wherein lies our authority – both collectively

and as individuals. What sort of denomination are we and how is this reflected in the way we govern ourselves? These are fundamental questions and until we answer them satisfactorily, our witness to the wider world will be ineffective at best and completely useless at worst.

When Mr Mason asserts that "one individual's vote is only worth about 1/20th" of a minister or EC member, the comparison is misleading. The General Assembly is not an assembly of individuals (unlike the old British & Foreign Unitarian Association) but an assembly of congregations and affiliated societies. This point is crucial to understanding our polity, our ethos, and our future. Neither Ministers, nor Executive Committee members nor Church delegates are individual voters. The General Assembly is not a direct democracy like the ancient Greek polis, the small city state. Like all modern democracies, it is a representative democracy, in which individuals and groups interact in various ways. In a simplistic nutshell, the General Assembly Meetings act as our 'parliament'.

Delegates are chosen (one hopes by due process) to represent congregations or affiliated societies. Ministers are a different case to lay delegates. But, like the lay delegates, they are not simply individual voters. As Ministers, they hold positions

(Continued on next page)

Letters to the Editor

Editor seeks Peckham church photograph

To the Editor:

For years I have been searching for a photograph or drawing of the outside of Avondale Road Unitarian Church, which was opened in Peckham in 1882 and was destroyed in the Second World War. It was the only picture I failed to include in *Peckham and Nunhead Churches*. I shall be delighted to hear from any reader who can enable me to find the missing picture.

John D Beasley

Editor

Peckham Society News
6 Everthorpe Road
London SE15 4DA

Inquirer or 'Private Eye'?

To the Editor

Opening my *Inquirer* of May 17th, I thought I must have made some dreadful mistake. I was convinced, when reading 'Letters to the Editor', that I had picked up my current copy of 'Private Eye' and had somehow wandered into one of its regular columns called 'Pedants' Corner'. I refer, of course, to the letter by Roderick Ramage, who was quite clearly incensed by the incorrect grammar in the wording of one of

GA's recently passed resolutions.

Mr Ramage was quite right to point out the grammatical error, but I find it inexplicable that he should get himself in such a lather over an issue that is hardly world-shattering. Where are the Unitarian qualities of reason and tolerance in all this? I realise that in criticising Mr Ramage in this way I might be tarred with the same brush, and although I am also aware that it takes one pedant to recognise another (my wife is telling me constantly that language changes and that I should rid myself of my old schoolteacher image), I do hope I can accept this grammatical lapse of the GA with a little more equanimity than many of the other grammar nerds who are regular readers of your journal.

Graham Williams

Kidderminster Congregation

Grammar error reflects true nature of Assembly

To the Editor:

Roderick Ramage (letters, 17th May) is to be applauded for his concern for correct grammar, at a time when so many people do not seem to bother with correct English usage.

However, I would still wish to argue the *need* to state 'GA recognise' rather than 'GA recognises'. While there is a grammatical argument for the former,

it is important to emphasise that the GA is collectively *all* the members of the Unitarian church, who do not speak with one collective mind, but are a plurality of individuals. There is no single GA voice, but only a collective of many.

The GA has always thrived on its plurality of voices, and this should not be negated simply for grammatical tidi-ness.

Joseph Kerr

Nottingham

Brenda Knopf is grateful for support

To the Editor:

I am very anxious to thank those who sent me good wishes when I had a stroke on the very day of the General Assembly. I am progressing slowly – it's a difficult time, but I am sustained by very good friends. One friend took over running the Meditational Fellowship that meets at Ammerdown on 8-10 August, under the leadership of David Monk. Please contact me if interested.

Brenda Knopf

4 Church Lane
Highfield
Southampton SO17 1SZ
02380 555333

Don't diminish call of vocational ministry

(Continued from previous page)

of authority, accountability, and responsibility.

Their authority comes from below – from the Congregations, Fellowships or Religious Societies they serve. Like a Member of Parliament, Ministers may be called or dismissed by their congregants. Their status results from their spiritual leadership being and recognised by their congregation(s). If the status of a minister is diminished, so too is the status of the congregation.

The local congregation calls the Minister, but her or his status is recognised, and given authority, by the wider denomination as a whole – the General Assembly. The GA sets academic, personal and pastoral training standards. Candidates must meet these standards, in order to be accepted onto the General Assembly Roll of Ministers. It is another layer of authority and accountability. Women and men with a calling to the vocational Ministry are subject to scrutiny and testing over a considerable period of time before being granted the status of minister. They are accountable to their congregations and to the wider movement.

Lay delegates at GA meetings give invaluable service to the denomination. But their accountability ends with their votes. Ministers have continuing accountability and responsibility. A delegate may be a newcomer who has little knowledge of the wider movement. But Ministers, as stipendiary office holders, have an ongoing commitment to our religious community. They represent a body of experience and learning which, together with their years of service, entitles them to be regarded as custodians of the tradition and guardians of the ethos of our movement.

Ministers who belong to the Ministerial Fellowship (and the vast majority of them are members) have a third level of accountability. They are held to certain professional standards by which they may be held accountable. Lay people are under no such strictures.

Almost every advanced democracy makes provision for a body of people who possess certain skills, aptitudes or experience. The common fund of human experience recognises this need for leadership. For example, ministry in the Reformed tradition (out of which we have come), the Sangha of Buddhist monks, the Catholic priesthood, or charismatic figures from various traditions all recognise that whilst we are all ‘children of God’ – sharers in the ministry of all believers – we do not have the same gifts. We all have many different gifts which aid the common good. They may be intellectual or practical, financial or administrative. The gift of ministry is another wonderful gift alongside these. We should give thanks for and nurture all of these gifts, including ministry.

Historically, church groups without a vocational ministry had limited growth and were less effective. And, as a lay person, I found inspiration from a previous generation of ministers and committed church leaders. If we continue the trend of the past few years in diminishing and undermining our vocational ministry, we will ultimately destroy our effectiveness as a beacon to our world. Our role as proclaimers of a liberal faith that brings light, love and peace would diminish. I hope all of us, both ministers and lay people in our precious denomination, continue to live up to that high calling.

The Rev Alex Bradley is Ministerial Fellowship secretary and writes here in a personal capacity.

Worship panel seeks service contributions

By David Dawson

The General Assembly's Worship Panel has over many years produced worship material for group use and for private reflection. The panel is always seeking ways of supporting congregations and has encouraged them to tell us what we can do for them. A questionnaire devised by panel member Barbara Smith on this very topic awaits full analysis. In the meantime, the Worship Panel is proposing two major and interlinked projects. Many worship leaders already search the internet for worship material, and in particular the Unitarian Universalist Association of America (UUA) 'Worship Web'. (www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/) Some UK writers have contributions on the UUA 'Worship Web'. We feel that we ought to be able to promote something similar as a link on our own GA web site. For those who have not visited the UUA Worship Web, you will find a large selection of words for worship: calls to worship, chalice lightings, prayers, meditations, readings, short sermons, and so forth. We do not yet have a name for the UK Worship Web – perhaps some imaginative Unitarian will think of something.

The second project is linked to the first one. Back in the '50s and '60s and before, Unitarian worship, in most congregations, was based around the eight 'Orders of Worship'. There have been some attempts since to produce liturgies for general use. These were generalist and all-encompassing in style and content. With the increase in lay-led worship, and for some con-

gregations, the difficulty in sometimes finding worship leaders, there would appear to be now some call for a modern, 21st century 'Orders of Worship'. These would not be complete orders of service – they never were – but would enable someone (the liturgist) to lead most aspects of the worship service, leaving another person to provide the talk/address/sermon.

So, this is a call for original worship resources. We hope that most of what we receive will go onto our own GA Worship Web and that selected items will form the basis for a new 21st century 'Orders of Worship'. Anyone can contribute. What do we want, or rather what do you want? Answer: Opening Words, Invocations, Chalice Lighting Words, Prayers, Meditations, Affirmations, Responsive Prayers, Covenants, Closing Words, Benedictions and so forth.

You may wish to base your contributions around a theme, a guiding principle, the seasons, the spiritual and religious year, an anniversary, or general relevance. Those are just examples – you may well find another focus for your writing. Although we are a small denomination, there is no doubt that we have plenty of people writing imaginative worship material. This initiative by the Worship Panel is an opportunity to share that material with other Unitarians.

The Rev Linda Hart will co-ordinate this project for the Worship Panel. Contributions may be sent by e-mail to lehart@gmail.com. Or by post to Linda Hart, 93 Richmond Road, Isleworth, Middlesex, TW7 7BS

News in brief



When Melanie Prideaux took a service on the theme of Courage, at Westgate Chapel, Wakefield, in May, she invited members of the congregation to talk about someone they regarded as a hero. Bill Humphreys spoke of his youngest son, Michael, who, as a member of the Territorial Army, was called up to serve with REME in Kuwait during the Gulf War. Despite having been injured (and airlifted to Cyprus for treatment), he was not deterred from serving again, in Iraq, from 2005-6. Bill brought the medal from Michael's first tour – which Bill himself had received from the Duke of Westminster while Michael was on duty abroad – to place on the communion table together with a photograph of Michael in battledress with some of his colleagues.

– Kate Taylor

Group seeks volunteers for website project
ukunitarians, a new group that is part of the Unitarian Communication Co-ordinators Network, is hoping to get together a group of people who would be prepared to view and use Unitarian websites and then give their comments. This would help those of us who create and maintain websites to improve our sites and learn from ordinary Unitarians (rather than techies) about what they want from a website. Anyone who is at all interested can contact me, Louise Rogers, on louise.rogers256@tiscali.co.uk

If there is anyone who would like their website reviewed please let me know. We will be sending out another request later in the year for this, if we have enough volunteers to do the reviewing.

– Louise Rogers

Shrewsbury hosts Darwin-inspired art

Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery have commissioned a work by the artist Dorothy Cross, inspired by a visit to the Galapagos Islands and by Shrewsbury's connections with Charles Darwin. It will be exhibited at Shrewsbury Unitarian Church from 14th June to 26th July. It will be mainly a video installation Dorothy Cross, an artist with an international repu-

tation, was invited to make new work responding in some way to '... the life and ideas of Charles Darwin'.

After visiting Shrewsbury and embarking on a period of research, Cross decided to make a return visit to the Galapagos Islands (She had been there 12 years previously) to gather footage and sound recordings from which to create a number of new video works.

She invited actor Fiona Shaw (a childhood friend and occasional collaborator) to accompany her and to join in the process of exploring current conditions on the Islands and to reflect, in that context, on the evolution of art itself and the role for artists within a world facing increasing environmental and cultural changes.

Charles Darwin was born and went to school in Shrewsbury. He attended the Unitarian church with his mother Susannah. 2009 marks the bicentenary of his birth and members of Shrewsbury Unitarian Church are delighted and excited to be hosting one of the first events in the run to the anniversary year.

– Alison Patrick

The Ministry We Need is available

Book Review: 'The Ministry We Need' – Richard Baxter (1615-1691) – an abridged and modernised version by W. Stuart Owen of 'The Reformed Pastor'

W. Stuart Owen recently came to Kidderminster Unitarians, wishing to see and photograph Richard Baxter's famed Jacobean carved pulpit. He brought a copy of his paperback book 'The Ministry We Need' explaining that he had undertaken the re-writing of Baxter's work in modern language as a valuable resource for those in ministry.

The 135-page book is really two books in one, for the second half gives an interesting account of Richard Baxter's tumultuous life. Unitarians should be aware that the author is an evangelical Christian and Baxter's work is avowedly evangelical in its thrust. Having said that, it is undeniably a powerful treatise and a compelling read.

A review by Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), the well known Northampton Non-conformist, comments that it is an amazing work which should be read and re-read by every minister.

The main import of the book places great emphasis on personal individual contact with the wider public – not just the congregation – as the most effective means of bringing newcomers to appreciate the value of a shared religious dimension to their lives. Also the use of catechisms (a form of teaching by question and answer) is of great help in this respect.

Kidderminster Unitarians have acquired limited copies of the book, which are available to interested persons. The cost is £5 including postage and packing from Roger Mathews 01562-850538.

– Roger Mathews

Sheffield Unitarian Chapels' Open Days

Fulwood Old Chapel and Underbank Chapel, Stannington, both Unitarian churches in Sheffield with 18th century buildings, will be opening for the Sheffield Heritage Churches Open Weekend on 14 and 15 June.

Full details on the website of Heritage Inspired under Events: Sheffield Heritage Weekend

– The Rev June Pettitt